

THE UNITED NATIONS CLUSTER APPROACH TO HUMANITARIAN AID: A  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND REFORM PROPOSAL BASED ON FOCUSED  
MITIGATION EFFORTS

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Overlap and gaps in assistance within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Cluster Approach for humanitarian aid is a major issue plaguing the international community and its response to emergencies. The inefficiencies within the cooperative effort of involved agencies leads to prolonged suffering and death within the countries in need of humanitarian aid. With these dire consequences riding on the ability of this mobilization system to function effectively, it is imperative that steps be taken to ensure competent humanitarian response. There is no clearly outlined path to assist those experiencing humanitarian crisis, but there is a particular objective in mind. This goal, to aid countries until the critical point at which they can appropriately help themselves, warrants an efficient and effective response from those unaffected by the crisis that is in both parties best interest. The following proposes that the Cluster Approach focus its efforts on mitigation and preparedness. Shifting to a system that concentrates on preventing humanitarian crisis in all regions would help the Cluster Approach to accomplish its intended goals of overall effectiveness, predictable leadership, enhanced partnership, and increased accountability. Improvements in these areas would ensure that fewer individuals would face the consequences of a humanitarian crisis and that those who do would receive competent assistance quickly.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief
<b>CARE</b>	Everywhere
<b>CERF</b>	Central Emergency Response Fund
<b>CLA</b>	Cluster Lead Agency
<b>ERC</b>	Emergency Relief Coordinator
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization
<b>GCLA</b>	Global Cluster Lead Agency
<b>HC</b>	Humanitarian Coordinator
<b>HCT</b>	Humanitarian Country Team
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>HRR</b>	Humanitarian Response Review
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>NGO</b>	Nongovernmental Organization
	Office for the Coordination of
<b>OCHA</b>	Humanitarian Affairs
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Program
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Program
	United Nations High Commissioner for
<b>UNHCR</b>	Refugees



**UNICEF**

United Nations Children's Fund

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

**USG**

for Humanitarian Affairs

**WFP**

World Food Program

## INTRODUCTION

Gaps and overlap in humanitarian aid are a persistent issue that the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) sought to remedy by creating and implementing the Cluster Approach. This method employs the use of integrated groups of nongovernmental organizations, local governments, and United Nations' agencies. These cooperative units focus on eleven different areas of humanitarian concern. A mutual effort to address the issues individuals in affected areas experience after emergencies was intended to offer a more complete response. In 2007, two years after the method was employed, an effort to evaluate the success of the Cluster Approach in filling gaps in aid distribution and providing a smoother method of aid mobilization. The in-depth analysis of the collaborative system revealed that many of the benefits that United Nations and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee hoped to gain by implementing the Cluster Approach had yet to be achieved. Though the system was still in its infant stage of development at the time of evaluation, the failures still raises major concerns about its long-term success. It is prudent to consider other viable alternatives to the Cluster Approach that could be an effective solution to the lack of efficiency experienced in aid mobilization and distribution. Just as important to consider is what is required ethically of the United Nations aggregate and the various agencies that stem from it. This analysis seeks to answer a very particular question. How can the United Nations, in conjunction with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), reconstruct the Cluster Approach in order to

uphold their moral responsibility to aid others and provide efficient and effective humanitarian assistance to those who are experiencing a state of emergency? Identifying a solution to this question involves defining individual moral responsibility to provide aid and detecting the major inefficiencies within the cluster system. After extensive research, I propose that a cooperative system focused on mitigation and preparedness would be the most efficient and morally responsible route for the Cluster Approach to employ.

The following analysis and proposal utilizes a systematic review as its research method. It relies on both qualitative and quantitative data in order to evaluate the perceived and actual success of the Cluster Approach. Chapter 1 offers a brief review of the history of United Nations humanitarian aid and their mission. In addition, it provides an analysis of select pieces of philosophical literature and seeks to identify the ethical responsibilities of individual agents to provide aid to those in need in an attempt to connect that responsibility to the United Nations aggregate. Chapter 2 provides context for the Cluster Approach and background on why it was initially introduced. Chapter 3 describes in explicit detail how the Cluster Approach operates and identifies deficits in the current system specifically identifying gaps and overlap in humanitarian assistance since cluster infrastructure was implemented. Chapter 4 introduces a new proposal calling for a shift in the focus of the Cluster Approach toward mitigation and preparedness in order to remedy kinks in the current system and ensure that the United Nations, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations are fulfilling their moral responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance.

The data analyzed was gathered from numerous published sources including philosophical publications, official United Nations' documents, reports from Inter-

Agency Standing Committee (IASC), and third party analyses. Synthesis of the information gathered revealed there was little discussion of the connection between international humanitarian assistance policy and an agent's moral responsibility. The research presented seeks to bridge the gap between philosophical theory and pragmatic policy solutions to an important global issue. Ultimately, it seeks to fulfill both social and moral obligations to the problems facing the international community.

## CHAPTER 1: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO HUMANITARIAN AID: WHAT IS REQUIRED OF AGENCIES INVOLVED IN THE CLUSTER APPROACH

The question of aid in times of crisis is a long-term predicament that many generations of global society have faced. This question is particularly difficult to answer because of the multiple facets of which it consists and its entertainment of the notion of ethical duty. Is there a responsibility to help other societies in times of crisis? If so, to whom does this responsibility belong? And finally, what kind of obligations make up this responsibility of aid in crisis? Amartya Sen and John Rawls offer insight on this issue of aid: what should be done and who should do it. In what follows, I will offer analyses of both Sen and Rawls position on crisis and aid. Then, I will connect the two arguments and conclude that well-ordered states have a responsibility to aid those in crisis and an obligation to ensure equity to prevent further crisis.

Amartya Sen addresses crises, aid, and prevention; specifically famine related crisis; in chapter seven, *Famines and Other Crises*, of his well renowned book *Development as Freedom*. He attempts to shift the argument about famine from one that focuses solely on the amount of food in a nation to one that is based on societal inequities. Sen claims that famine in the modern world is not just caused by an imbalance between food and population, but it is also caused by the lack of freedom that people must access and possess an adequate amount of food or means to produce food. His argument concentrates on the lost economic and substantive power, referred to as entitlements, within societies that are experiencing famine. He finds his solution in the

reapportionment of this power to the poor and affected.

To begin his argument, Sen describes the distribution, or allocation, of food within a society. Sen rationalizes his belief claiming,

“Food is not distributed in the economy through charity or some system of automatic sharing. The ability to acquire food has to be earned. What we must concentrate on is not the total food supply in the economy but the “entitlement” that each person enjoys: the commodities over which she can establish her ownership and command. People suffer from hunger when they cannot establish their own entitlement over an adequate amount of food”.<sup>1</sup>

These entitlements, and lack thereof, have less to do with the quantity of food in a particular society and more to do with the social and political arrangements that occur there. A person’s entitlements depend on endowment, production possibilities, and exchange conditions.<sup>2</sup> If any of these factors are disrupted or altered, it can affect their ability to acquire resources, with this case in particular, food.

According to Sen, entitlement failures, not lack of available resources, is the major cause of famines. He explains,

“Since famines are associated with the loss of entitlements of one or more occupational groups in particular regions, the resulting starvation can be prevented by systemically re-creating a minimum level of incomes and entitlements for those who are hit by economic changes”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sen, Amartya. "Chapter 7: Famines and Other Crises." *Development as Freedom*. New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. 160-203. Print. Page 137.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.162-163.

<sup>3</sup> Sen, Amartya. "Chapter 7: Famines and Other Crises." *Development as Freedom*. New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. 160-203. Print. Page 168.

The solution to ending and preventing famines is found in programs and employment opportunities that simulate the base level of entitlement for those individuals and groups that lost theirs. This burden falls on the government and policymakers of a society to ensure that the disenfranchised individuals are guaranteed a substantive amount of entitlements in order to avoid or end famine and the resulting starvation. Sen explains that these programs give affected individuals, "...the ability to compete for food in the market, making the available supply more equally shared."<sup>4</sup> In addition, these programs allow "...potential famine victims to be treated as active agents, rather than as passive recipients of governmental handouts."<sup>5</sup> Sen explains that the integration of governmental and nongovernmental institutions in the creation of employment, income, and ultimately opportunity is extremely important in the abolition of famine and the expansion of the economy in general that can help increase and protect entitlements to prevent famine.

The solutions mentioned by Sen can only remedy or prevent famines when the government or ruling body is sovereign and democratic. Sen states,

The causal connection between democracy and the nonoccurrence of famines is not hard to seek. Famines kill millions of people in different countries in the world, but they don't kill the rulers. The kings and the presidents, the bureaucrats and the bosses, the military leaders and the commanders never are famine victims. And if there are no elections, no opposition parties, no scope for uncensored

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.177.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.178.

public criticism, then those in authority don't have to suffer the political consequences of their failure to prevent famines.<sup>6</sup>

Only a government that is accountable to its constituents can end starvation from famine and protect their society from future threat. For a state to be fully accountable to its constituency it must take every step to prevent major devastating events from occurring and helping to better prepare for the future in case such event inevitably ensues. This accountability should manifest itself as mitigation and preparedness policies and emergency training efforts. Democracy insists that leaders take on the burden of crisis just as its people do. In this case, there is no distinction or gap between *us* and *them*.<sup>7</sup>

This creates a personal stake and urgency in its duty to prevent famine, which as previously stated, are easily prevented. With this in mind, Sen claims, "...the absence of democracy is in itself an inequality—in this case of political rights and powers. But more than that, famines and other crises thrive on the basis of severe and sometimes suddenly increased inequality."<sup>8</sup> Absence of democracy, in Sen's perspective, is a considerable inequality and can lead to many failures in entitlements that cause and famine.

In Part III, *Non ideal Theory*, of John Rawls' work *The Law of Peoples*, he acknowledges the importance of Amartya Sen's analysis of famines. Rawls states, ...in his empirical study of four well-known historical cases, he found that food decline need not be the main cause of famine, or even a minor cause. The main problem was the failure of respective governments to distribute (and supplement)

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<sup>6</sup> Sen, Amartya. "Chapter 7: Famines and Other Crises." *Development as Freedom*. New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. 160-203. Print. Page 180.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.175.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.187.



what food there was...[famines] are attributed to faults within the political and social structure, and its failure to institute policies to remedy the effects of shortfalls...<sup>9</sup>

Rawls names this type of society, one “burdened by unfavorable conditions”, as a burdened society.<sup>10</sup> He attempts to evaluate the relationship between the peoples of well-ordered societies and the peoples of burdened societies, particularly in the case where burdened societies are faced with crisis.

Rawls claims that peoples of well-ordered societies have a particular obligation to aid those in burdened, non-liberal societies when they experience emergency situations and crisis. This duty is limited and is not synonymous with the duty that compatriots have to each other. Rawls explains that, “...there is no recipe, certainly no easy recipe, for well-ordered peoples to help a burdened society to change its political and social culture.”<sup>11</sup> Though he explains that there is no easy process to providing aid, Rawls also contends that,

...the aim is to help burdened societies to be able to manage their own affairs reasonably and rationally and eventually to become members of the Society of well-ordered Peoples. This defines the “target of assistance.”<sup>12</sup>

The goal of this assistance is to put societies in crisis in a position where their problems are manageable enough so they can become well-ordered and hopefully enter willingly into the society of well-ordered peoples. Although Rawls sees no duty for assistance past this point, the end goal is to have all societies enter into the society of well-ordered

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<sup>9</sup> Rawls, John. *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print. Page 109.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 108.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 111.

peoples. Employing Rawls' reasoning, it would be more efficient to help those societies implement mitigation policies and preparedness techniques in preparation for crisis than it would be to provide limited amounts of aid after each crisis occurs. Focusing on formulating a system for these burdened societies to mobilize in order to avoid destructive effects of crises, satisfies the moral obligation that Rawls' describes while also helping these societies to transition into a well-ordered condition.

In addition to highlighting the existence of a duty to aid, Rawls also provides insight into what people of well-ordered societies are responsible for in their aiding of non-liberal societies facing crisis. He argues,

...merely dispensing funds will not suffice to rectify basic political and social injustices (though money is often essential). But an emphasis on human rights may work to change ineffective regimes and the conduct of the rulers who have been callous about the well-being of their own people.<sup>13</sup>

Simply throwing money at a non-liberal society in an emergency or crisis will not effectively or efficiently aid them, and it is not what Rawls suggests being done. What Rawls does recommend is that peoples of well-ordered societies work to adequately and fairly distribute power and eliminate gross injustices in non-liberal societies. This includes the development of proper mitigation strategies to prevent more problems from arising in the wake of avoidable crises. He contends,

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<sup>13</sup> Rawls, John. *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print. Page 108-109.

“...there is no society anywhere in the world that—except for marginal cases—  
with resources so scarce that it could not, were it reasonably and rationally  
organized and governed, become well ordered.”<sup>14</sup>

With this notion in mind, Rawls claims that liberal, well-ordered societies have a responsibility to aid other non-liberal, burdened societies by restructuring their existing institution, correcting injustices, and allowing the societies themselves to hopefully become liberal and well-ordered on their own. This includes creating and perfecting mitigation efforts such as governmental policies and preparedness training within a society.

Rawls and Sen both offer significant insight into the responsibility of an established liberal society to aid other societies in times of crisis. If a liberal society is facing crisis, they should try integrating governmental and nongovernmental components to ensure the entitlements of their constituents and ultimately end the crisis. If a non-liberal, burdened society is experiencing a crisis, well-ordered, liberal societies have a limited duty to assist these countries by clearing their problems enough so they themselves can reorganize and become liberal societies and members of the society of well-ordered peoples. Simply explained, liberal societies have a fundamental responsibility to aid non-liberal, burdened societies experiencing crisis to a point at which those countries can assist themselves. This assistance, though it is not explicitly defined, can be specified in a myriad of different ways.

Though there is no explicitly outlined proper way to assist a society experiencing a crisis, there is a specific goal in mind. This goal, to aid countries until the pivotal point

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<sup>14</sup> Rawls, John. *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print. Page 108.

in time at which they can suitably help themselves, warrants an efficient and effective response from the liberal, well-ordered society providing aid that is in both parties best interest. In order to address the prescribed responsibilities outlined by Sen and Rawls, the best of course of action for liberal, well-ordered societies is to aid in the development of mitigation strategies for countries requiring aid. The age-old adage, “Give a man to fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime,” holds true in analyzing this predicament. Providing aid in response to a crisis by simply handing out needed resources or repairing infrastructure will surely remedy the situation for the time being but it lacks the ability to equip the non-liberal, burdened society with the tools to help themselves for the time being, and undoubtedly, for the future. Placing a metaphorical bandage on a crisis does not fulfill the responsibility of liberal, well-ordered societies to provide aid until the country in crisis is self-sufficient. Doing this only perpetuates the problem and ensures that those societies will be in need of assistance in the future. By giving these societies that are experiencing crises the tools to avoid and prepare for emergencies, liberal, well-ordered societies accomplish the goal of sustaining burdened societies until they are equipped to handle the crisis without assistance. This perspective moves the obligation from a place of reaction and response to a position of forethought and planning.

The benefits of this interpretation of the ethical obligation of liberal, well-ordered societies to provide aid to burdened societies experiencing crisis are two-fold. Providing assistance during the creation and implementation of mitigation policy reduces the likelihood that the societies will require aid in the future because they have the tools in place to either handle the crisis on their own or avoid a crisis altogether. This lessens the

burden of moral responsibility on liberal, well-ordered societies, and it grants the burdened society the sovereignty to manage their own emergency situations, which is an empowering thing for the group as a whole. Empowering these burdened societies could lead to a stronger collective society of well-ordered people.

## CHAPTER 2: RATIONALE FOR HUMANITARIAN AID REFORM AND CONTEXT FOR THE CLUSTER APPROACH

Efficiency and effectiveness are common goals of almost all organizations regardless of their specific sector or personal mission. This is especially true for establishments that provide a service to individuals and even more so for those working with emergency response and humanitarian aid. Overlap and gaps in assistance within an emergency response group are not only major inefficiencies in the organization. Left unresolved, these problems could translate into an increase in suffering and death in the areas receiving the aid. The United Nations, an intergovernmental organization devoted to global cooperation, faced major inefficiency issues with its Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In response to the disorganization, the United Nations implemented a new systematic method to aid that sought to reduce the amount of overlap and gaps in assistance and promoted a multifaceted approach to relieve and solve emergency situations. Named for its multidimensional and cooperative structure, this new method is referred to as the Cluster Approach.

In the mid 2000s, the modern world was experiencing an epidemic of emergency situations characterized by its vast and devastating effects. Darfur, the western region of the African country of Sudan, was facing a deficit of basic resources and major conflict over land and these resources between ethnic groups. Public perception of the United

Nations response to the emergency situation deemed it to be completely insufficient.<sup>15</sup> Poor public opinion on the emergency response in Darfur prompted the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs (USG) and Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) in conjunction with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to commence the *Real-time Evaluation of the Humanitarian Response to the Darfur Crisis* in August of 2004.<sup>16</sup> The intent of this assessment was to identify areas in emergency response that needed improvement within Darfur and on a broader level that could apply to future humanitarian assistance efforts.<sup>17</sup>

Based predominantly on learning, the evaluation of the United Nations humanitarian response in Darfur also enlisted the assistance of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE).<sup>18</sup> The assessment was conducted in real-time over a series of three visits to Sudan: September 2004, January/February 2005, and June/July 2005 through a "...first hand observation, surveys, key stakeholder interviews, focus groups, background documents, participatory workshops...and other lessons learned exercises".<sup>19</sup> The intent of this approach was to allow department officials to observe and evaluate the response to the humanitarian crisis as it occurred and to develop and implement changes

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<sup>15</sup> Broughton, Bernard et al. *Inter-Agency Real-Time Evaluation Of The Humanitarian Response To The Darfur Crisis*. 1st ed. 2006. Web. 12 Mar. 2016.  
[https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/RTE\\_DARFUR\\_Final\\_Report\\_14\\_Mar.pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/RTE_DARFUR_Final_Report_14_Mar.pdf)  
Page 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

to the current system of aid in real-time for a more immediate solution.<sup>20</sup> Based on the approach, the majority of the information for the evaluation was gathered by frontline components including United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and some beneficiaries.<sup>21</sup>

Based on the observations and information the study collected, the United Nations concluded that the humanitarian response to the crisis in Darfur was "...delayed and inadequate, primarily due to the inability of agencies to mobilize capacity and resources".<sup>22</sup> Organizations and agencies cannot be forced to operate successfully under a directive approach.<sup>23</sup> During this time, humanitarian response was structured in a standard way in which tasks are allotted to individuals from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom without group-based input or further questioning. This superior to subordinate, chain of command type mobilization was not efficient or successful in providing complete assistance to those experiencing crisis. Orders from one individual lack comprehension of the entirety of the situation and leave room for significant gaps in the distribution of aid. Instead, organizations must compromise and come up with cohesive

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<sup>20</sup> Broughton, Bernard et al. *Inter-Agency Real-Time Evaluation Of The Humanitarian Response To The Darfur Crisis*. 1st ed. 2006. Web. 12 Mar. 2016.  
[https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/RTE\\_DARFUR\\_Final\\_Report\\_14\\_Mar.pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/RTE_DARFUR_Final_Report_14_Mar.pdf)  
Page 2.

<sup>21</sup> Broughton, Bernard et al. *Inter-Agency Real-Time Evaluation Of The Humanitarian Response To The Darfur Crisis*. 1st ed. 2006. Web. 12 Mar. 2016.  
[https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/RTE\\_DARFUR\\_Final\\_Report\\_14\\_Mar.pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/RTE_DARFUR_Final_Report_14_Mar.pdf)  
Page 2.

<sup>22</sup> Humphries, Vanessa. "Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach." *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*. April 30, 2013. Accessed September 28, 2015.  
<http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 2.

<sup>23</sup> Humphries, Vanessa. "Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach." *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*. April 30, 2013. Accessed September 28, 2015.  
<http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 2.



approach to adequately aid those in emergency situations.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the evaluation found that there were “...gaps in coordination, information sharing, interagency coordination, strategic leadership, and cross-sectorial issues such as livelihoods, gender, and protection”.<sup>25</sup> The conclusions of this evaluation increased the necessity for reform within the emergency response and humanitarian aid systems.

The evaluation of humanitarian aid in Darfur and the heightened awareness of disasters following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 led the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) to commission the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) to find a way “... to improve the effectiveness and timeliness of humanitarian response to emergencies”.<sup>26</sup> The Humanitarian Response Review evaluated the capacities of United Nations, non-governmental agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent, and other humanitarian agents and provided ways to alleviate inefficiencies in response.<sup>27</sup> The United Nations created and applied a series of reforms in 2005 based on this study. Categorized into four pillars, the reforms sought to

...improve humanitarian leadership (through Humanitarian Coordinators system); [implement] better coordination of humanitarian action (through the Cluster Approach); promote faster, more predictable and equitable funding (through improved humanitarian financing, such as the Central Emergency Response fund (CERF)); and [facilitate] more effective partnerships among all humanitarian

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<sup>24</sup> Humphries, Vanessa. "Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach." *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*. April 30, 2013. Accessed September 28, 2015. <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

actors (through the Principles of Partnership implemented in 2007).<sup>28</sup>

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) sought to create a more synchronized humanitarian aid response in December of 2005 when they established The Cluster Approach. Aligned with the second pillar of reform designed by the United Nations, the Cluster Approach was created “...to address gaps in humanitarian response and to improve the predictability, accountability, and effectiveness of relief efforts through a more coordinated humanitarian relief response.”<sup>29</sup> It was created to remedy the detrimental aspects of the current humanitarian aid in emergency situations within the United Nations and provide more useful aid for individuals and countries experiencing major crises across the world.

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<sup>28</sup> Humphries, Vanessa. "Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach." *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*. April 30, 2013. Accessed September 28, 2015. <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 4.

### CHAPTER 3: A DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE CLUSTER APPROACH

Established as a means to fix the myriad of problems created by an inefficient and futile system, the Cluster Approach was considered a promising reform for emergency aid mobilization. This method sought to bring about “...predictability, responsibility, accountability and partnership in all areas of humanitarian action” within the scope of the United Nations and those organizations with which they operate.<sup>45</sup> With the adoption of this new type of management guiding humanitarian relief, the focus of preparation for aid shifted to a new direction. “...[A] group of organizations coalescing around a common area of work...” paired with “...a spirit of inclusivity and partnership where all stakeholders are transparently and mutually accountable for what they do” was the goal of the Cluster Approach at its creation.<sup>46</sup> The success of the approach is based almost exclusively on the complete participation of the parties involved.<sup>47</sup> Like many collective efforts, the investment of the agencies within these specific groups is vitally important in ensuring that all issues related to an emergency situation are addressed, that no affected group is excluded, and that overlapping response does not

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<sup>45</sup> Shepherd-Barron, James. *Clusterwise: Everything You Wanted To Know About Cluster Coordination But Were Afraid To Ask*. 1st ed. Manchester, United Kingdom: Aidessentials Ltd., 2014. Web. 12 Mar. 2016. Page 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

occur. “The Cluster Approach aims to strengthen system-wide preparedness, make sure that critical materials and expertise are immediately available, and focus technical capacity.”<sup>48</sup> This system seeks to “...identif[y] ways to work together for better collective results.”<sup>49</sup> It was generated as an efficient response to “large non-refugee complex humanitarian crises, in which needs extend beyond any one agency's mandate and where the needs are of sufficient scale and complexity.”<sup>50</sup> Using this process allows for several improvements in the humanitarian aid provided by the United Nations. The Cluster approach “increases transparency and accountability...in resource allocation, establish[es] co-leadership, and focus on operational performance,” through developed mechanisms unique to the process.<sup>51</sup> In addition, this method of humanitarian aid management “enhances predictability” through less ambiguous “sector and thematic responsibilities.”<sup>52</sup> The Cluster Approach more fully engages “national and local authorities.”<sup>53</sup> Having a single person to call within the international humanitarian architecture speeds up the resolution of issues, and allows greater access for [nongovernmental organizations] (NGOs) to government and [United Nations] UN decision-makers.<sup>54</sup> The inclusive nature of the approach allows for the involvement of

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<sup>48</sup> UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

“affected communities” in the aid process.<sup>55</sup> It “...requires humanitarian actors to consult and engage with the populations they assist...[and] affected communities help to determine the best responses to the problems they face.”<sup>56</sup> Using a fortified system of collective effort toward a common ultimate goal, the Cluster Approach stimulates more “effective advocacy.”<sup>57</sup> When clusters, singly or collectively, speak with one voice on issues of common concern, and with affected groups who are not normally heard, advocacy has more weight.<sup>58</sup> Finally, “formal processes of coordination within and between cluster,” including “...joint strategic and operational planning...enhance efficiency and improve effectiveness.”<sup>59</sup> These enhancements have led to a more comprehensive and successful relief response to non-refugee emergencies throughout the world.

The Cluster Approach is a multifaceted system that emphasizes a hierarchical structure with leadership at each level. Organizing the system in such a way ensures accountability from the smallest of tasks to the largest of responsibilities. “At the global level, the aim of the cluster approach is to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies by ensuring that there is predictable leadership and accountability in all the main sectors or areas of humanitarian response.”<sup>60</sup> The creation of clusters at a global level helps to fill gaps in assistance and “...enhance technical

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<sup>55</sup> UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC).” UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> *Guidance Note On Using The Cluster Approach To Strengthen Humanitarian Response*. 1st ed. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2006. Web. 30 Mar. 2017. <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/460a8ccc2.pdf>. Page 2.

capacity and better ensure the immediate availability of critical material and expertise.”<sup>61</sup>

At a country level, “...It is about achieving more strategic responses and better prioritization of available resources by clarifying the division of labour among organizations, better defining the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian organizations within the sectors, and providing the Humanitarian Coordinator with both a first point of call and a provider of last resort in all the key sectors or areas of activity.”<sup>62</sup> Though sectors at this level have existed for quite some time, “...it was usually the case that only a limited number of sectors had clearly designated lead agencies accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator.”<sup>63</sup> “The cluster approach aims to rectify this by ensuring that within the international humanitarian response, there is a clear system of leadership and accountability for all the key sectors or areas of humanitarian activity.”<sup>64</sup> The implementation of the cluster system was not meant to overhaul the previous methods that the United Nations and global society used. The Cluster Approach aims to strengthen the old system of assistance and revitalize the efforts to create a more efficient and effective method of providing humanitarian aid in times of crisis.<sup>65</sup> As a whole, the structures of the cluster system and the policies implemented by it have raised “...the standards in humanitarian response.”<sup>66</sup> The Cluster Approach does this by specifically outlining accountability, definitively dividing emergency relief into separate facets, and

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<sup>61</sup> *Guidance Note On Using The Cluster Approach To Strengthen Humanitarian Response*. 1st ed. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2006. Web. 30 Mar. 2017. <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/460a8ccc2.pdf>. Page 3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 5.

providing contacts for these various components associated with humanitarian aid in times of crises.<sup>67</sup>

In order to achieve the most effective outcome, the Cluster Approach is structured in a specific way that complements the problems that global society faces in the wake of an emergency. This particular structure translates into eleven separate but interdependent clusters that cover the spectrum of issues often associated with crisis. “In practice, clusters were introduced for nine areas of response and two service areas.”<sup>68</sup> “The service clusters differ from the response clusters in that they provide services to other humanitarian organizations, rather than the affected population, have a stronger focus on global preparedness activities and, where necessary, act as the main service provider, rather than as provider of last resort.”<sup>69</sup> These clusters are appropriately named after the sectors of humanitarian aid that they encompass: logistics; nutrition; emergency shelter; camp management and cooperation; health; protection; food security, emergency telecommunication; early recovery; education; and sanitation, water, and hygiene.<sup>70</sup> “Clusters provide a clear point of contact and are accountable for adequate and appropriate humanitarian assistance.”<sup>71</sup> The following figure provides a visual representation of the different clusters and the United Nations’ offices to which they correspond.

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<sup>67</sup> *Guidance Note On Using The Cluster Approach To Strengthen Humanitarian Response*. 1st ed. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2006. Web. 30 Mar. 2017. <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/460a8ccc2.pdf>. Page 5.

<sup>68</sup> Steets, Julia et al. *Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report*. 1st ed. Global Public Policy Institute, 2010. Web. 16 May 2016. [http://www.hiwa.urd.org/IMG/pdf/GPPi-URD\\_Synthese\\_EN.pdf](http://www.hiwa.urd.org/IMG/pdf/GPPi-URD_Synthese_EN.pdf). Page 5.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> "Cluster Coordination." Cluster Coordination | OCHA. Accessed September 28, 2015. <http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/coordination-tools/cluster-coordination>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Figure 1: Designation of the Clusters of the United Nations Cluster Approach



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In addition to these eleven main clusters, there are several “cross-cutting issues” or “sub-clusters” that “...enjoy a similar status to independent clusters.”<sup>73</sup> These crosscutting issues include age, environment, gender, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDs).<sup>74</sup> They are referred to as cross-cutting issues because of their unique ability to involve several clusters at once. The following chart provides an organized visual of how clusters and crosscutting issues are divided and which agencies lead each designated cluster.

<sup>72</sup> "Cluster Coordination." Cluster Coordination | OCHA. Accessed September 28, 2015. <http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/coordination-tools/cluster-coordination>.

<sup>73</sup> Steets, Julia et al. *Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Synthesis Report*. 1st ed. Global Public Policy Institute, 2010. Web. 16 May 2016.

[http://www.hiwa.urd.org/IMG/pdf/GPPi-URD\\_Synthese\\_EN.pdf](http://www.hiwa.urd.org/IMG/pdf/GPPi-URD_Synthese_EN.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



Figure 2: Clusters and Lead Agencies at the Global Level

<b>Figure 1. Clusters and Lead Agencies at the Global Level</b>	
<b>Clusters for Response Areas:</b>	<b>Cluster Lead Agencies:</b>
Camp Coordination & Camp Management	UNHCR/IOM
Early Recovery	UNDP
Emergency Shelter	UNICEF/Save the Children
Food Security	FAO/WFP
Health	UNICEF
Protection	UNHCR
Water, Sanitation & Hygiene	UNICEF
<b>Service Clusters:</b>	
Emergency Telecommunications	OCHA/WFP/UNICEF
Logistics	WFP
<b>Cross-cutting Issues:</b>	
Age	Help Age International
Environment	UNEP
Gender	IASC Sub-Working Group Co-Chairs
HIV/AIDS	UNAIDS

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Structure is an integral part of the Cluster Approach and its realization. In order for the system to completely accomplish its goals, it must be organizationally stable on both small and large-scale levels. The Cluster Approach and those who lead the relatively small-scale efforts are components of a much larger hierarchy of international aid and response. The “coordination architecture of the cluster approach” is vitally important for its continued efficient and effective operation.<sup>76</sup> Without cooperation from the agencies involved, the concentrated effort to offer strategic, effective aid to regions

<sup>75</sup> Humphries, Vanessa. "Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach." *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*. April 30, 2013. Accessed September 28, 2015. <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 3.

<sup>76</sup> "UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." *UNHCR Emergency Handbook*. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 5.

experiencing emergency situations will not work. At the most senior level is the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).<sup>77</sup> The Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) "...is responsible for overseeing all complex emergencies that require UN humanitarian assistance."<sup>78</sup> In essence, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) is the executive body to which all United Nations humanitarian assistance is accountable. "In countries affected by disasters or conflict, the ERC may appoint a Humanitarian Coordinator [(HC)]."<sup>79</sup> The Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs is the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC).<sup>80</sup> Lead by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) "...is a unique inter-agency forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making."<sup>81</sup> The United Nations General Assembly established the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in June of 1992 in order to improve inter-agency coordination and effectiveness in response to humanitarian crisis.<sup>82</sup> It is composed of both "...United Nations and non-United Nations humanitarian partners..." and is responsible for "...develop[ing] humanitarian policies, demarcates responsibilities across the various dimensions of humanitarian assistance, identifies and addresses gaps in response, and

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<sup>77</sup> "UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 5.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

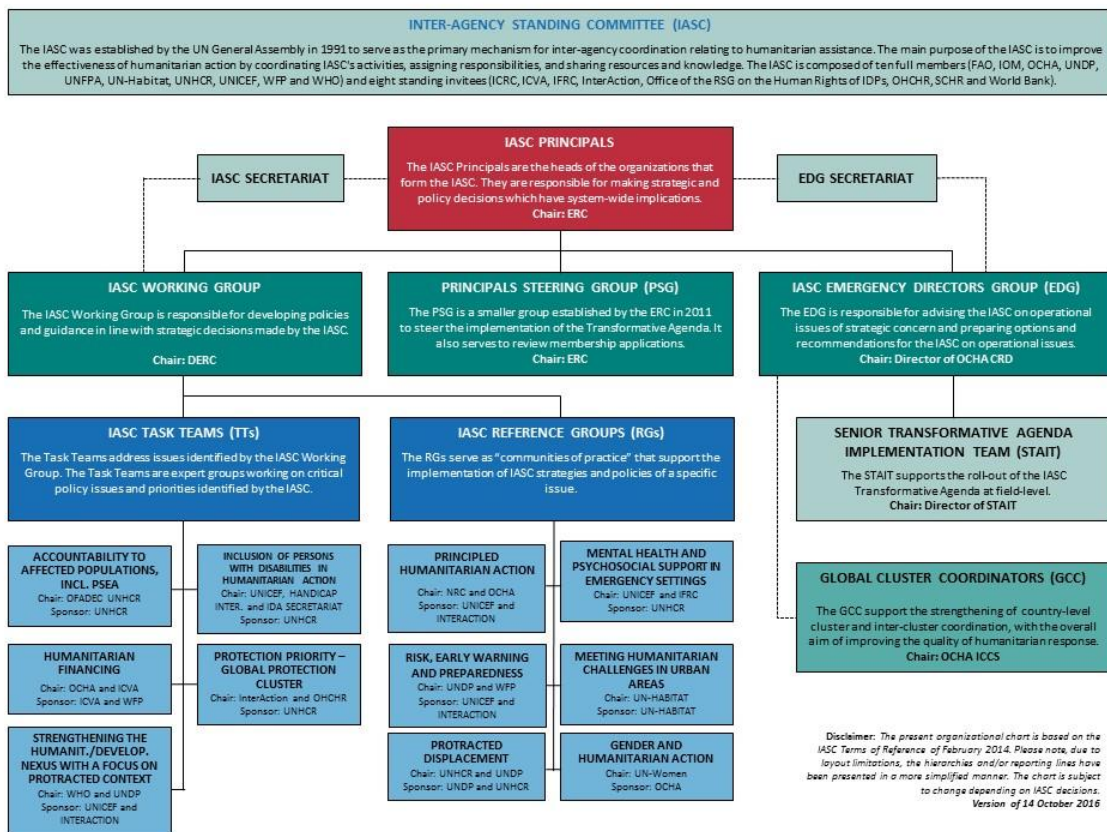
<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid 5.

<sup>82</sup> "IASC Structure." Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). February 2014. Accessed March 12, 2017. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/content/iasc-structure>.

advocates for effective application of humanitarian principles.”<sup>83</sup> Due to the complex nature of humanitarian crises and the sheer number of agencies that could be involved in response, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is exceptionally large and intricate in organization. The following chart outlines the structure of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the myriad of agencies that operate under its umbrella.

Figure 3: The Structure of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)



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Accountable to the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), the Humanitarian

<sup>83</sup> "UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 5.

<sup>84</sup> "IASC Structure." Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). February 2014. Accessed March 12, 2017. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/content/iasc-structure>.

Coordinator (HC) in a country where an emergency has occurred “...is responsible for assessing whether an international response is warranted and, if it is, for ensuring it is well organized.”<sup>85</sup> In much simpler terms, the Humanitarian Coordinator is a regional director of emergency response. The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) leads a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), “...a strategic and operational decision making and oversight forum,” composed of “...representatives from the United Nations (UN), International Organization for Migration (IOM), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)...” and a representative from the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement.<sup>86</sup> The Humanitarian Country Team “...is responsible for agreeing on strategic issues related to humanitarian action.”<sup>87</sup> This inter-agency initiative are solely concerned with the most efficient humanitarian response for their particular region. Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs) are accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT).<sup>88</sup> The head of a Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) “...ensures that coordination mechanisms are established and properly supported, act as first point of call for the government and [Humanitarian Coordinator] (HC), [and] are the provider of last resort in their respective cluster.”<sup>89</sup> Under the Cluster Lead Agency (CLA) is a Cluster Coordinator. A Cluster Coordinator is “...responsible for ensuring that cluster-specific concerns, and challenges that cannot be solved within a cluster, are raised and properly discussed by the [Humanitarian Country Team] (HCT), and that strategic decisions are

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<sup>85</sup> "UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 6.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

shared and implemented at operational level.”<sup>90</sup> This individual or group “...acts as an ‘honest broker’ independent of their parent agency affiliation.”<sup>91</sup> They set goals and make decisions based upon the best interest of the program for humanitarian aid mobilization. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) “...works closely with global cluster lead agencies and NGOs to develop policies, coordinate inter-cluster issues, disseminate operational guidance, and organize field support.”<sup>92</sup> On a local level, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) supports the decisions of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and “...facilitates inter-cluster coordination.”<sup>93</sup> “It also helps coordination between clusters at all phases of the response, including needs assessment, joint planning, and monitoring and evaluation.”<sup>94</sup> The following figure offers a visual presentation of the architecture and hierarchy of the United Nation’s cluster approach.

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<sup>90</sup> "UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 6.

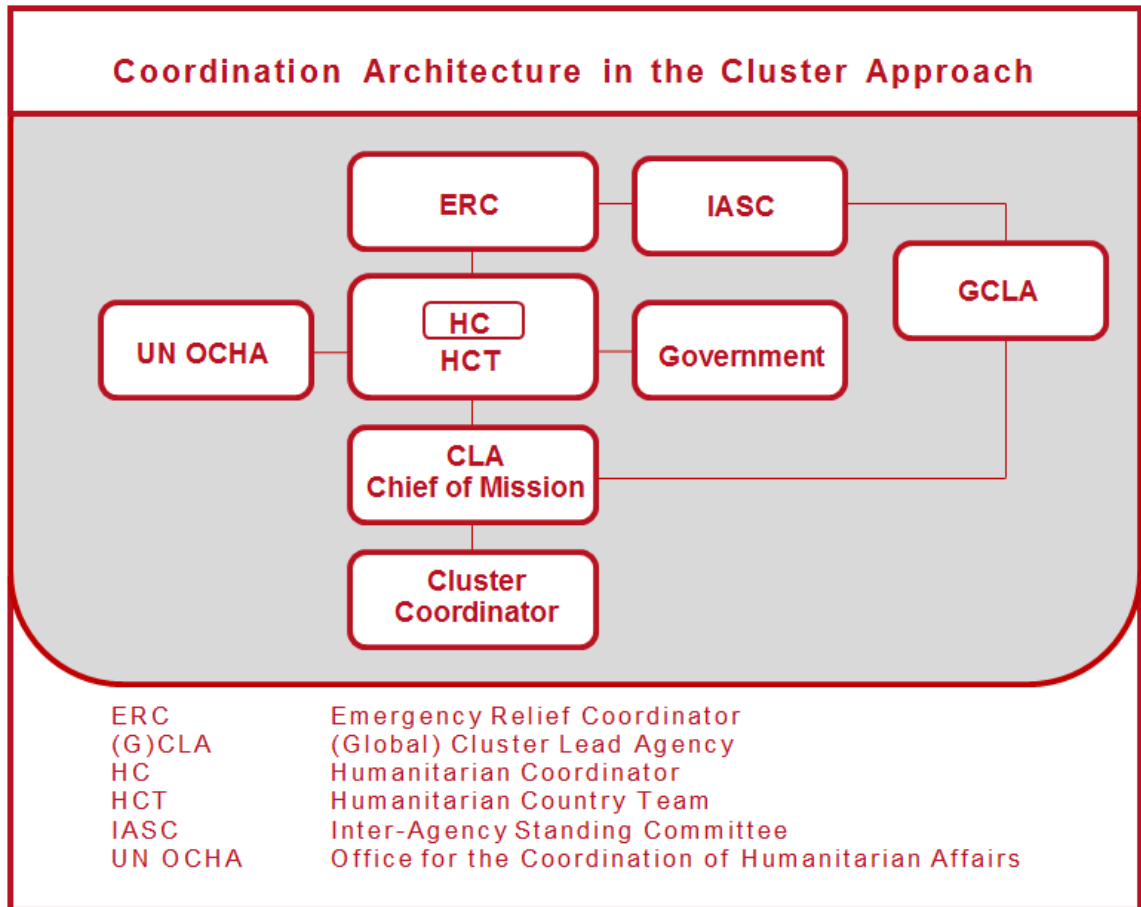
<sup>91</sup> Shepherd-Barron, James. *Clusterwise: Everything You Wanted To Know About Cluster Coordination But Were Afraid To Ask*. 1st ed. Manchester, United Kingdom: Aidessentials Ltd., 2014. Web. 12 Mar. 2016. Page 8.

<sup>92</sup> "UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid..

Figure 4: Coordination Architecture in the Cluster Approach



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For each emergency or disaster, a group or cluster is generated. This cluster includes individuals from a myriad of groups including but not limited to several United Nations departments, nongovernmental organizations, and various government agencies. “Organizations that join clusters undertake to adhere to humanitarian principles and the principles of partnership, participate in actions that specifically improve accountability to affected populations, engage consistently in the cluster’s collective work, and make

<sup>95</sup> "UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC)." UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Accessed May 17, 2016. <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc>. Page 5.

capacity available for this, make the best use of resources, and share information on organizational resources, take on leadership responsibilities as needed and as capacity and mandates allow, and help to develop and disseminate advocacy and messaging for relevant audiences.”<sup>96</sup>

### *Evaluations of the Implementation of the Cluster Approach*

Since the implementation of the cluster system, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) of the United Nations (UN) have evaluated its progress on two separate occasions. The first evaluation, conducted by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), took place in 2007, the third year of the system’s implementation.<sup>97</sup> Mixed methods including interviews, document review, field visits, and surveys were used to fully evaluate the impact of the Cluster Approach and identify the areas of weakness.<sup>98</sup> This primary evaluation found that most survey respondents and interviewees believed that the Cluster Approach had filled some of the gaps in humanitarian aid experienced before it was implemented.<sup>99</sup> Many believed the general effectiveness of humanitarian aid utilizing the Cluster Approach was successful, but it lacks efficiency in the areas of partnership enhancement, leadership quality, and accountability at all levels. Though many of these gaps have been filled, the evaluation reveals that the consensus is that these results were not realized immediately, at the first

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<sup>96</sup> UNHCR Emergency Handbook: Cluster Approach (IASC). (n.d.). Retrieved May 17, 2016, from <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc> (page 6)

<sup>97</sup> Stoddard, Abby et al. *Cluster Approach Evaluation Final*. 1st ed. 2007. Web. 16 May 2016. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/4955.pdf>. Page i.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 7.

implementation of the Cluster Approach in 2005.<sup>100</sup> These issues in implementations are expected in the early stages of implementation of such a large systemic approach that has far reaching effects. As the Cluster Approach continues to be used to mobilize humanitarian relief for those experiencing crisis, policy kinks and remaining gaps and overlaps in assistance will be addressed as with any extensive program. United Nations policy reformers need to identify those issues that impede proper employment of the mobilization system to ensure the benefits are realized.

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<sup>100</sup> Stoddard, Abby et al. *Cluster Approach Evaluation Final*. 1st ed. 2007. Web. 16 May 2016. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/4955.pdf>. Page 7.



#### CHAPTER 4: FOCUSED MITIGATION AND PREPAREDNESS EFFORTS WITHIN CLUSTERS AS AN ATTEMPT TO STRENGTHEN THE CLUSTER APPROACH AS A COLLECTIVE BODY

Since evaluation started, the Cluster Approach's reform process has been focused on more efficient and effective mobilization and action after a humanitarian crisis, contained or widespread. United Nations' policymakers and assessors concentrated on four distinct pillars of emphasis to measure the progress of and identify the gaps and shortcomings within this new systematic approach. These four intended goals of the Cluster Approach include: improving effectiveness in overall humanitarian response, creating predictable leadership, enhancing partnership between different humanitarian actors, and increasing the accountability of relief efforts.<sup>115</sup> With these four goals in mind, reformers synthesized the effects of the implementation of the Cluster Approach and gauged its overall success. In doing so, major issues were highlighted and the opportunity for policy reform arose. Future success of the Cluster Approach will be determined by the changes made to the structure and concentration of the system. In what follows, I will propose the idea that emphasis on formal mitigation efforts within each of the nine clusters will ultimately lead to a more efficient system capable of achieving its goals. "Mitigation involves deciding what to do where a risk to the health, safety, and welfare of society has been determined to exist and then implementing a risk

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<sup>115</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>.

reduction program.”<sup>116</sup> In other words, “...mitigation is sustained action to reduce or eliminate risk to people and property from hazards and their effects”.<sup>117</sup> Within the context of humanitarian crisis, mitigation would involve identifying vulnerabilities within a particular area and making adjustments after an emergency to ensure that future crises are less likely to occur and if they do occur that they are quickly and efficiently handled with ease. These adjustments could include hazard identification and mapping, design and construction applications such as code sensitivity and retrofit ordinances, land-use planning including proper zoning rules and prohibition of development in high risk zones, financial incentives for preparedness, and structural controls.<sup>118</sup> On the ground level, mitigation would require recognition of potential emergency situations and working to prevent or more adequately respond to them. Internationally, humanitarian crises are largely social and political.<sup>119</sup> This being said, mitigation and preparedness efforts would help individual countries, nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations bypass obstacles that would impede relief, recovery, and reconstruction. In some instances, mitigation might even eliminate the presence of certain emergencies.

Easing the burden of a humanitarian crisis is a mutual goal of all agencies involved in the Cluster Approach mobilized through the United Nations. In order to properly respond and ultimately eradicate the humanitarian issues experienced by the international community, executives within the cluster system must look to those at the center of struggle. Grassroots level personnel as well as local governmental entities and

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<sup>116</sup> Sylves, R. T. (2015). *Disaster policy and politics: emergency management and homeland security* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: CQ Press. Page 21.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 23.

individual victims hold the answer to a successful recovery. Without proper understanding of the problems local people are experiencing, response and recovery are simply not possible. Inability to respond to the problem when it occurs certainly makes the possibility of mitigation virtually impossible. This kind of victim focused efforts utilized by the cluster system would allow complex bureaucracy to more completely comprehend the local struggles of the common individual. Better understanding and leadership from the grassroots level will help in the development and enactment of successful mitigation programs because they would adequately address the real issues being experienced and local victims would be invested in the process of preparedness. In terms of cluster engagement, this grassroots level would include personnel from local governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations agencies, and affected individuals.

In 2006, a joint research team lead by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) evaluated the Cluster Approach for efficiency and overall success during the first two years of its existence using various methods including stakeholder interviews and responses from three hundred thirty-four online surveys.<sup>120</sup> “These methods were used to seek evidence or specific contributions made by the cluster approach in the following areas: identifying and filling gaps in programme areas and coverage; strengthening overall capacity to respond and cutting response time; improving partnerships for humanitarian action, including with the host state; improving standards; integrating cross-

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<sup>120</sup> Stoddard, Dr. Abby et al. *Cluster Approach Evaluation Final*. 1st ed. Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 2007. Web. 16 May. 2016.  
<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/4955.pdf>.  
Page 1.

cutting issues; improving needs assessment, prioritisation, and strategic planning; and, above all, fostering predictable and accountable leadership in the field.”<sup>121</sup>

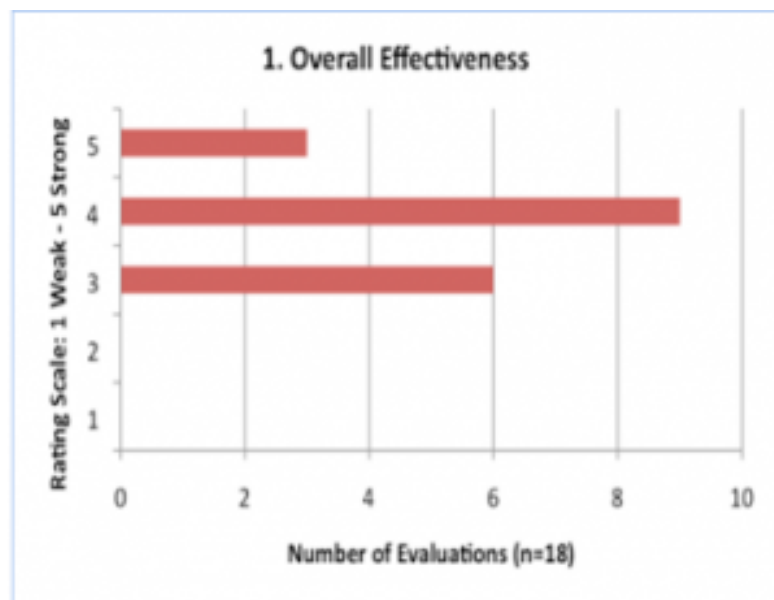
The evaluation was published in November of 2007 and included identification of, “...the four main intended outcomes of the Cluster Approach, as defined by [the Inter-Agency Standing Committee] (IASC): Overall effectiveness at improving humanitarian response, creating predictable leadership, enhancing partnership between humanitarian actors, and increasing the accountability of relief efforts.”<sup>122</sup> In stating these intended outcomes, the joint committee created a system through which to evaluate the Cluster Approach in a standardized fashion. Figures 4 through 7 show the four intended outcomes of the Cluster Approach on a one to five rating scale based upon eighteen different evaluations and case studies written on the topic.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. 4 - 5.

Figure 5: Perception of the Success of the Goal of Overall Effective within the Cluster Approach



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Figure 6: Perception of the Success of the Goal of Predictable Leadership within the Cluster Approach

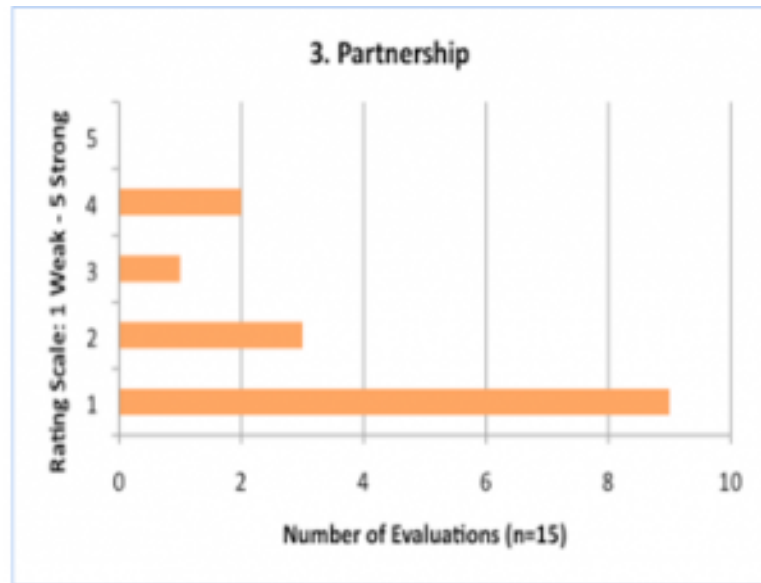


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<sup>123</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 17.

Figure 7: Perception of the Success of the Goal of Partnership within the Cluster

Approach



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Figure 8: Perception of the Success of the Goal of Accountability within the Cluster

Approach



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<sup>124</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 17.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

The figures present the reality that only overall effectiveness is perceived as relatively strong. In addition, the figures assert the truth that the Cluster Approach is not observed as fulfilling its goals of predictable leadership, partnership, and accountability.

According to this meta-analysis of evaluations and case studies, the Cluster Approach is not achieving the goals for which it was established. These failures bring into question the focus of the system and how to remedy the shortcomings to ensure future success.

The central focus of the Cluster Approach to date has been cooperative, early response to humanitarian crisis, which is a reactionary response to large-scale problems. Considering the issues experienced using this focus, it would be more beneficial for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to adopt a mitigation and preparedness focus for the Cluster Approach moving into the future. Concentrating on mitigation and preparedness would provide a common incentive of decreased workload and expenses for local governments, nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations to succeed. This would have significant benefits for the three intended outcomes in which the Cluster Approach is currently falling behind. In order to identify these benefits, it is useful to analyze in depth these intended outcomes.

Though the meta-analysis of evaluations and case studies showed that overall effectiveness of the Cluster Approach was perceived as relatively strong, this does not guarantee that the system is functioning in the highest capacity, nor does it assert that the goal is completely accomplished. Evaluating the improvement of overall effectiveness of the Cluster Approach involves asking the following questions: “Has the Cluster

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<sup>126</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 17.

Approach improved overall humanitarian action? And are there positive benefits for humanitarian relief and actors?”<sup>127</sup> Asking these questions leads one to consider the notion of humanitarian relief coordination and if the implementation of the Cluster Approach has brought about constructive change. Further, this kind of analysis brings into consideration whether policymakers within the United Nations and adjunct groups should continue to employ it as a means of mobilizing humanitarian response efforts. Effectiveness, in essence, is the amalgamation of all other components of an analysis that describes a program or system’s overall success. This being said, problems with effectiveness regarding the Cluster Approach are generally very broad and encompass many of the issues that are already denoted in the other three areas of the analysis. Though generally perceived as satisfactory, a few comprehensive issues impede the complete effectiveness of the Cluster Approach. First, the existing coordination mechanisms of the Cluster Approach have reached their limits for large-scale, multifaceted crises.<sup>128</sup> Large-scale disasters or major catastrophes can be defined as events that trigger the loss of lives in the hundreds to thousands, and that affect millions of people, collapse/damage thousands of buildings and create huge economic losses in proportion to the scale of economy of the areas affected.<sup>129</sup> The 2010 Haitian earthquake, a current example of a large-scale disaster, exposed that “...there was a plethora of international, national, and local humanitarian actors, all with varying levels of skills,

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<sup>127</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 6.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>129</sup> Lassa JA. Post Disaster Governance, Complexity and Network Theory: Evidence from Aceh, Indonesia After the Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004. PLOS Currents Disasters. 2015 Jul 1 . Edition 1. doi: 10.1371/4f7972ecec1b6.



experience, and capacity, during which the cluster's coordination mechanism was stretched beyond its capacity."<sup>130</sup> Second, though there is optimism about the future of the Cluster Approach, local and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have raised concerns about the system's inclusiveness.<sup>131</sup> The ability of United Nations personnel, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and governments to interact seamlessly is vital to the success of the entire mobilization effort. Lastly, nongovernmental organizations expressed apprehension over the Cluster Approach because they felt it was impeding their humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality.<sup>132</sup> Many of these organizations believe that they are perceived as pursuing political goals through this kind of assistance.<sup>133</sup> The intermingling of political agendas and personal missions is a major concern of these organizations, but the diversity of groups involved in the Cluster Approach allows for increased flexibility and ultimately sovereignty of independence for each member.<sup>134</sup>

These concerns about effectiveness can be remedied by making a concentrated effort to implement more mitigation policies for areas experiencing crises using the Cluster Approach. Many humanitarian crises that are large-scale could be reduced to a manageable size if proper preparedness efforts had been made. Those problems that could be effectively avoided could be through mitigation, thus reducing the collective size of the crisis. This would eliminate the issue expressed by many that the Cluster

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<sup>130</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 7.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 8.

Approach was not suitable for emergency situations that are multi-faceted or extensive in size. In addition, mitigation efforts would foster an inclusive atmosphere for the diverse group of agencies involved within the Cluster Approach. A centralized goal of reducing the need for assistance would give agencies an incentive to work together efficiently. Lastly, collective focused mitigation attempts would aid in the removal of the notion that organizations would be asserting political agendas outside of their personal mission. There is no political charge in the prevention of humanitarian crises, only assistance.

Predictable leadership is another one of the four major goals of the Cluster Approach. Evaluation of the system's ability to promote predictable leadership indicated that most surveyed believed that the Cluster Approach was doing a subpar job. In investigating the ability to promote predictable leadership, one must ask if communication between members is effective and if tasks charged to members are being completed.<sup>135</sup> Using these questions as the basis for analysis, a myriad of issues arise. First, there is a high rate of turnover for cluster coordinator.<sup>136</sup> This constant change in leadership inhibits the cluster's ability to focus on the tasks allocated to them because they are concerned with the modification in leadership style. In addition, cluster leads have responsibilities connected to their own particular agency, which gives the impression that they are prioritizing that agency's projects over other projects that match need in the specific area experiencing humanitarian crisis.

Focusing heavily on mitigation and preparedness instead of quick and early

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<sup>135</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 8.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

response will ensure that though there are changes in leadership the goal for which any leader is aiming is synonymous. Therefore, when a leadership change is made, the way in which a particular cluster is working will not be affected and progress will continue to be made. Mitigation efforts offer the mutually beneficial outcome of decreased need for assistance because many issues are taken care of before they occur. This translates into reduced workload for involved parties. A mutually beneficial result ensures that each party will take steps to reach that goal instead of merely focusing in personal agendas or exclusively beneficial goals. Shifting the focus of the Cluster Approach to primarily mitigation and preparedness policy will eradicate the apprehension that Cluster Leads are using their leadership power shovel funds or manpower in the direction of their home agency. These changes will increase the Cluster Approaches ability to promote predictable and efficient leadership.

The Cluster Approach was implemented to help enhance partnership between United Nations agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of all levels, and government departments.<sup>137</sup> Evaluation of this goal after the system's implementation revealed that few believed this was actually being accomplished. Analysis of this intended goal of the Cluster Approach involves investigating the relationships between parties within clusters. Partnerships within clusters are to be in accordance with the Principles of Partnership document, which was endorsed by the Global Humanitarian

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<sup>137</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 9.

Platform in 2007.<sup>138</sup> This document specified that partnerships should be transparent, consultative, and have equitably shared power among partners.<sup>139</sup> Where the Cluster Approach has failed to foster this type of relationship is between United Nations Agencies and local and national nongovernmental agencies (NGOs). The consensus among nongovernmental agencies (NGOs) is that compromise and communal influence over decisions is lacking in the implementation of the Cluster approach. This group in particular feels that they have a passive role and seem to merely take orders from the cluster lead agency.<sup>140</sup> This inequitable distribution of power contradicts the purpose of the Cluster Approach. In addition, the way in which cluster meetings are operating is extremely exclusive. Many times, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not made aware of these meetings and thus fail to attend based on ignorance. It is also not uncommon for these meetings to be held in a language that is not native to the region in question and are held in the capital cities of these places where United Nations offices are located.<sup>141</sup> This does not enhance partnership within the cluster, which impedes tasks from being accomplished and aid from reaching those who need it. It only encourages gaps in assistance and further incompetence within the cluster system.

. Concentrating on mitigation efforts could have substantial benefits for partnerships within clusters. Those that completely understand the risks present within a particular region are the only individuals that can generate effective preparedness policy. To fully comprehend the potential for danger of a place, one must have spent a

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<sup>138</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 9.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

considerable amount of time living in that place. For this reason, mitigation policy is best when developed with the assistance of a local individual or group. By heavily focusing on mitigation strategies, clusters would depend on the expertise of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that often come from the area in need of assistance. To understand the risks to which that particular region is vulnerable, it would be imperative that concerted efforts to extend meeting invitations to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) be made. In addition, it would require the way in which decisions are made to move to a more collective forum of conversation that requires each group's input. This dependency would foster a better working relationship between United Nations agencies, government offices, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) within all clusters.

Accountability is another intended goal of the Cluster Approach. Evaluation of this aspect has found that most did not perceive improvement since the implementation of the cluster system. The Cluster Approach was created to help establish upward, downward, and lateral accountability and increased transparency in humanitarian relief efforts.<sup>142</sup> Ultimately, the goal in establishing accountability and transparency is to ensure that things are actually being accomplished and not just talked about. The notion of downward accountability, ground level groups and individuals holding hierarchy to their promises, is one that is not currently being enhanced by the implementation of the Cluster Approach. Currently, decisions are made at the top and tasks are allocated downward with little regard or understanding of the ground level. In addition, lateral accountability within clusters is lacking, as the partnerships are weak and power not

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<sup>142</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 11.

equally distributed. Lastly, upward accountability holds more weight than it should within the cluster system, and it has been used as an explanation for why things do not go as intended. Specifically, cluster lead agencies receive much of the blame for initiatives that fail.<sup>143</sup> This universal lack of accountability has led many tasks to be left incomplete.

The common benefit associated with a system focused on mitigation and preparedness would allow the Cluster Approach to foster enhanced accountability in all respects. With the ground level experience being of utmost importance for effective mitigation policy, there would be increased engagement at the grassroots level, which would bring the target of the humanitarian aid to the forefront. When the target of aid is made more apparent, they gain more power because the hierarchy can no longer depersonalize the group in need. This enhances downward accountability significantly. In addition, the collective benefit of less need for response keeps cluster members accountable to each other. Each party within the cluster has incentive to succeed thus “buying in” to the collective body the Cluster Approach is trying to promote. If one member of the group fails to complete their task, then no one benefits. Parties within the cluster will monitor their colleagues in order to ensure the benefit is achieved. No individual member of the Cluster Approach will want to be the one that impeded the collective benefit of successful mitigation. For this reason, it would be in all parties’ best interest to specify tasks that must be completed, and who is responsible for their completion. This will increase overall transparency and will allow failures to be clearly identified, which eliminates blame being nonchalantly placed on cluster lead agencies.

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<sup>143</sup> Humphries, V. (2013, April 30). Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. Retrieved September 28, 2015, from <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/1976>. Page 12.

Shifting the focus of the Cluster Approach to a system of focused mitigation and preparedness efforts would tremendously enhance its effectiveness in humanitarian response. The intended goals of overall effectiveness, predictable leadership, enhanced partnership, and increased accountability would be achieved by working to prevent major humanitarian crises by working to development mitigation strategies. These strategies and policies would aid individual countries, nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations circumvent complications that would encumber relief, recovery, and reconstruction and, in some instances, could help eliminate humanitarian crises altogether. It is in the best interest of the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to shift the focus of clusters toward mitigation to foster a more competent system altogether.

## CONCLUSION

Overlap and gaps in assistance within the Cluster Approach are not only major inefficiencies within that particular group of organizations. The inefficiencies within the cooperative effort of involved agencies leads to prolonged suffering and death within the countries in need of humanitarian aid. With these dire consequences riding on the ability of this mobilization system to function effectively, it is imperative that steps be taken to ensure competent humanitarian response.

There is no explicitly outlined guide to assist those experiencing humanitarian crisis, but there is a specific goal in mind. This goal, to aid countries until the critical point at which they can appropriately help themselves, warrants an efficient and effective response from those unaffected by the crisis that is in both parties best interest. Amartya Sen and John Rawls assert that the most effective way to assist is for liberal, well-ordered societies is to aid in the development of mitigation strategies for countries requiring aid. Merely providing aid in response to a crisis by simply distributing required resources or repairing infrastructure will fix the issue for the moment, but it does not equip a group with the means to help themselves. This kind of humanitarian response does not help a society to become self-sufficient, and in fact, it only perpetuates the problem and ensures that those societies will be in need of assistance in the future. Offering support during the formation and employment of mitigation policy reduces the probability that these societies will require future humanitarian aid because they have the ability to handle issues themselves.



In addition to being the best alternative in terms of ethics, focusing on mitigation and preparedness of humanitarian crises is the best option for ensuring the Cluster Approach is a competent system. Shifting to a system that focuses on preventing humanitarian crisis in all regions would help the Cluster Approach to accomplish its intended goals of overall effectiveness, predictable leadership, enhanced partnership, and increased accountability. Improvements in these areas would ensure that fewer individuals would face the consequences of a humanitarian crisis and that those who do would receive competent assistance quickly. Ultimately, concentrating effort within clusters on mitigation and preparedness could eliminate a significant amount of suffering within the world.

## ENDNOTES

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